

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory

I. Overview of Activities

The interim evaluation of the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL) was held in Aurora, Colorado at McREL's headquarters from May 3 through 7, 1999. This reviewer's report represents a synthesis of a tremendous quantity of data from diverse formats obtained both before and during the site visit. Prior to the site visit, this reviewer read and glossed all material provided by DIR mapped to the eight evaluation questions and surfed several of the most frequently accessed McREL URL's: (www.mcrel.org; www.mcrel.org/about; www.mcrel.org/standards; www.mcrel.org/resources; www.mcrel.org/products; www.mcrel.org/programs; www.mcrel.org/cgi.bin/mguestbook/ugb.cgi; the New York Times website (www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/lessons), which has been licensed to reproduce and display the Compendium; and the Achieve Standards Clearing House Website, (www.achieve.org) which correlates content from state curriculum and standards to the McREL data base of standards. During the site visit, this reviewer participated in group presentations and interviews with McREL staff, an on site interview with the OERI Program officer, and multiple teleconference interviews with various groups, including five representatives of the McREL Board of Directors (The President of the Chamber of Commerce, a principal of a junior/senior high school, a chief state school officer, a State Representative, and an Education Consultant), four members of the Iowa User Group (a Curriculum and Assessment Consultant, a Staff Development Coordinator, an Elementary Principal, and a Curriculum and Technology Coordinator); four members of the North Dakota User Group (a Director and Coordinator of Professional Development at the Missouri SEA and the Superintendent and Curriculum Coordinator of a LEA in Wyoming) and McREL management staff and representatives of the Moving Standards into Practice (Signature

Work 1) and Partnerships as a Field Service Strategy (Signature Work 2), and discussions with peer review panelists.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is McREL doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years?

1. Strengths

There is abundant and diverse evidence that McREL has met its contractual obligations in all task related areas. They have a growing national and international reputation in curriculum, learning , and instruction. They have served, to the extent that resources are available, the needs of customers in the central region and throughout the nation. And they have leveraged funds and resources to accomplish more work.

As the standards movement gained momentum and multiple reports recommended the adoption of standards at the national and district level, McREL seized the opportunity to inform decision making regarding the development of standards in response to numerous requests from SEAs and LEAs on policy and design.

Related to Task 2 (Research and Development), McREL has established formal long-term field-based collaborative action research partnerships that promote systemic reform with six of the seven states within the central region: Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming. In addition to these long-term partnerships, McREL has developed less formal, shorter-term relationships with associations and school sites both within the region, e.g., Adams City High School and Skyview High School in Colorado, and outside the region e.g., the POLLARIS Project in Alaska and the American Sports Institute in Chicago and San Francisco.

McREL has also established multiple partnerships with university researchers to design and expand the learner centered survey items and adapt and administer them in college level classrooms both within the region (e.g., Colorado, North Dakota) and extensively outside the region (e.g., Michigan, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Florida, Indiana, Alaska, Illinois, Kentucky). And in an effort to scale up its work in learner-centered instruction, McREL has collaborated with five of the other nine Regional Education Laboratories including AEL, LSS, NCREL, SERVE and WestEd.

Pertaining to Task 3 (Field Services), McREL attempted to establish a relatively formal collaborative partnership in each state within the central region to ensure the Laboratory Program remains responsive to local, state, and regional needs. These teams are known as the State Facilitation Group, the Regional Field Services Team, and the Collaborative State Action Team. McREL also developed a partnership with each State Education Agency in its region. The focus of the collaborations was state-specific and representative of diverse needs including promoting effective professional development in Colorado; school improvement in Kansas, building a system to assist local districts implement school reform in Missouri, language and cultural diversity in Nebraska, strategic planning related to the Title 15 Education Code in North Dakota, and collaborative planning for school success in South Dakota, and assessment guidelines for limited English proficient students in Wyoming.

To provide services to regional constituents, McREL teamed with several Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) in Colorado and Nebraska. McREL also enhanced capacity to create systemic reform by identifying long term field service sites representing a wide array of cultures and settings. The research focus in each field site, like the research focus in each long term research site, addressed specific needs: Literacy and student achievement in

Colorado; professional development North Dakota standards in Kansas; assessment in K-1 reading in Missouri; language and cultural diversity in Nebraska; student achievement and reading in North Dakota; instruction in South Dakota; and classroom assessment and reading in Wyoming. McREL also collaborated with Central Region states to develop implementation plans for the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) and workshops to prepare local educators for the CSRD initiative. In addition to the formal collaborative structure, McREL created and maintained partnerships with a broad range of other service providers, universities and professional associations to leverage its resources and scale-up systemic reform. These included the Colorado Association of School Executives, the National Center of Education Statistics, the National Rural Education Association, Policy Studies Associates, SD Associated School Boards, and the University of Missouri at both Kansas City and St Louis.

McREL also forged partnerships for designing and promoting special events such as conferences, policy forums, and Diversity Roundtables, and established partnerships related to Task 4 for developing a Network of ED funded Service Providers and related to task 5 (the LNP Network) and related to Task 6 (OERI assistance) for strengthening partnerships with other regional Education Labs.

2. Areas of needed Improvement

1. McREL should make the timely delivery of contract deliverables a priority. The evaluation reports and the OERI Program officer confirmed that some of the contract deliverables were delayed. Some of this delay may be attributable to vacancies within McREL. It was acknowledged during the presentations that McREL is striving to fill vacancies which have ranged from approximately 10% to 20 % within the last three contract years. Currently, the “Jobs at McREL” link on the McREL web site identifies six positions which are vacant, three of which are at the Senior Associate level.
2. McREL should continue to strive to include more individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds both on their governing Board and staff. According to the September

1998 EEO Report, the gender and ethnicity composition of McREL staff is predominately female Caucasian.

3. Recommendations for improvement

1. Persist in establishing a long-term research and development site in Kansas so that all seven states within the central region have this opportunity.
2. Continue to encourage the formation of a Collaborative State Action Team (CSAT) in North Dakota and South Dakota.
3. Reexamine the role of the Regional Research Team (RRT), and provided members have technical training and/or experience in research, measurement or statistics, have them review and critique, rather than design, research products.

B. To what extent is McREL using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

1. Strengths:

1. McREL has an elaborate quality assurance system which includes customer self report data on product and service satisfaction. Details are addressed in question 5.

2. Areas of needed Improvement

McREL products and services for self monitoring need to be more valid and reliable. McREL reported that they have 14 staff members with some degree of formal, rigorous training in measurement, research and statistics. However, there is the suggestion in at least a few of the products reviewed, particularly in the measurement, survey and action research arena, that this expertise has not been fully called upon.

3. Recommendations for improvement

To more fully serve the emerging measurement and research needs that defining and implementing standards has created, McREL should bring their technical staff resources into the research and assessment planning and evaluation collaborations more frequently. If current staff are over committed and hiring more permanent staff with educational measurement and research

training and experience is not within the budget, then a possible alternative is to form a long term national technical advisory group (TAG Group) and convene them perhaps quarterly to advise them.

III. Quality

A. To what extent is McREL developing high quality products and services?

1. Strengths

There is considerable evidence that McREL is developing high quality products and services. This evidence broadly ranges from enthusiastic testimonials from customers in the region regarding McREL's technical assistance with tailored products and services, numerous requests for publications and resources, and awards for the McREL website.

During several teleconferences with clients, a Missouri partner proclaimed that McREL changed the culture of its SEA from a regulatory agency to a resource-facilitator for school improvement. Another customer in a Wyoming LEA praised McREL for its work in helping to development standards and matching district assessments. He also crowed that teachers are now teaching to standards and gave one example of an unaccredited school becoming, within one year, fully accredited thanks to help from McREL. North Dakota representatives praised McREL for helping them develop content and performance standards and designing and developing assessments in English Language Arts and mathematics.

In addition to services, McREL's publications have been in demand. Some of the popular ones are: *The Rise and Fall of Standards-based Education* commissioned by the National State Boards of Education; the *Comprehensive Guide to Designing a Standards-based Classroom, School and District*; *Awash in a Sea of Standards*; four editions of *Content Knowledge: A*

Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks; Eight Questions You Should Ask Before Implementing Standards-based Education at the Local Level; and the controversial survey report on *What Americans Believe Students Should Know: A Study of U.S. Adults*. They also have had requests for issues of the *Changing Schools Newsletter*, a journal style publication *Noteworthy*, and in response to need they will prepare four issues of a new publication *McREL Policy Briefs*.

And lastly, according to the “About McREL” web page, McREL URLs have received more than 20 awards. These include, to name only five, the Links2Go Resource award for its collection of lesson plans, the Suite101.com “Top 5 Best of the Web Award,” one of the USDE’s Picks o’ the Month for Connections+, and NetGuide’s Gold Site Award for being one of the best on the web.

2. Areas of needed Improvement

1. McREL should broaden its research on standards by investigating the relationships between academic standards, (e.g., the universe of knowledge skills and abilities that students should know), and performance standards, (e.g., how well do they need to know it).
2. Strive to more formally enhance quality assurance procedures and build greater rigor into research design and data analysis. More detail is provided in responses to other questions.
3. McREL staff should publish more frequently in refereed journals to expand their visibility nationwide. Practitioner oriented publications might be more relevant for most of the action-oriented research McREL conducts in field service sights.

3. Recommendations for improvement

1. Investigate whether varying the expected performance standard effects teacher perceptions of the amount of time required to deliver instruction on standards.
2. Identify and investigate the variables that might impact performance standard expectations. Even when multiple groups identify highly similar academic standards, their perceptions of how good is good enough may vary substantially. Variables that might impact this perception include: (1) the purpose for which the test will be used (e.g., high stakes graduation requirement vs. lower stakes school improvement accountability or percent of final course grade); (2) whether the performance standard

- should be based on individual standards or collections of standards within content areas; (3) whether the performance standard may be compensatory, i.e., exceptional performance on some standards may balance out poorer performance on others, either within a content domain or across core subject areas; and (4) the importance of perceived satisfactory performance on standards for the world of work and a personally productive life.
3. Stress to the stakeholders with whom you are providing technical assistance on the development of academic standards and the assessments designed to measure them, the importance of designing early a cyclic review process built around public engagement for enhanced ownership so that both the content standards, criterion-referenced assessments, and associated performance standards may be updated as content and measurement methodology expands, changes or improves. To many of McREL's customers who are struggling with the initial iterations of these documents, this recommendation may seem like a luxury that they cannot afford at the time. However, in this reviewer's experience, this has been a powerful lesson learned by other states and districts that could well prevent considerable stress and expense later on as review, revision, and public buy-in typically takes several years.
 4. Continue to strive to recruit and retain a multi-talented, energetic, caring, motivated ethnically diverse staff .

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and services provided by McREL useful to and used by customers?

1. Strengths

There is considerable evidence that the products and services provided by McREL are useful to and used by customers. According to the website utilization statistics provided by McREL, in the three years between February 1996 and February 1999 the total website hits increased about ten fold. Additionally, the McREL website data base is referenced on or hot linked to more than 1,300 other URLs. McREL has also produced video workshops; Standards in the Classroom and Thinking and Reasoning in the Classroom, disseminated its Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks extensively both through McREL and ASCD.

2. Areas of needed Improvement

1. Although website hits have increased substantively within the last three years, a survey revealed that only 18% of respondents had accessed information via that route. Therefore, McREL should continue to promote the dissemination of information on the Internet particularly to distant sites in their region.
2. Although many of the surveys conducted or commissioned by McREL did appear to have adequate sample sizes and response rates, some of the survey research is methodologically flawed and not particularly informative. One example is the follow-up survey research intended to determine how the document, *A Comprehensive Guide to Designing Standards-Based District, Schools, and Classrooms* was actually used in school districts. The response rate was only 11 clients of 28 potential interviewees identified (cf. data source 169). Within the seven central states there are 2,099 school districts, 7, 906 schools, and over 168,000 public school teachers according to Central Regional State Profile Data (data source 112). Therefore, more valid and reliable results to inform decision making would have been possible had they obtained additional data from the ASCD sales data base before conducting the study.

3. Recommendations for improvement

1. All proposed survey research intended to investigate the use of McREL's products and services within the region and/or to identify strategies that McREL might use to enhance these products and services should be carefully designed attending to the criteria for quality survey research, particularly details such as adequate sample size and representativeness.

B. To what extent is McREL focused on customer needs?

1. Strengths

McREL has consistently been sensitive to the needs of customers and the OERI. During the past contract period McREL has focused on gathering data on customer needs via diversified methods. For example, McREL commissioned the Gallup Organization and Quality Education Data to conduct telephone polls, held focus groups with state education agency staff within the region, convened meetings with the central region's state chief school officers, and tracked internally information requests and feedback from McREL field staff.

2. Areas of needed Improvement

Use multiple measures to determine customer needs. Seek direct evidence of impact of staff development on participants.

3. Recommendations for improvement

1. McREL should include students on their advisory committees so that the student perspective may be heard.
2. Encourage administrators to permit voluntary professional development, linked to school improvement plans, so that teachers, principals, central office staff may create individualized professional development plans composed of at some, if not all “elective” continuing education opportunities.

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is McREL’s work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

1. Strengths

1. Continue to stress the importance of standards-driven instruction instead of measurement driven instruction.
2. Testimonials from user groups such as clients in Iowa, North Dakota, Wyoming and Missouri affirm that teachers are now teaching to standards thanks to McREL.

2. Areas of needed Improvement

1. *The Trainer’s Manual, Research into Practice Series: Implementing Standards in the Classroom*, includes the key point in chapter 2 that “Teaching to the test is appropriate if the test assesses what you expect students to know and what they have had an opportunity to learn.” This reviewer believes that this position sends the wrong message. McREL should make an important, but subtle distinction between “teaching to the test” and “teaching to the target.” The target is the applicable academic standards a.k.a. the “population domain” that all teachers should teach and all students are expected to master. By contrast, the “test,” and any parallel test forms based on the standards, is but a small relative and representative “sample” of that target domain. Teachers who effectively teach to the target, the standards, are more likely providing opportunities for students to learn the standards, and thus are indirectly preparing students to pass or perform well on any tests designed to measure the standards. By contrast, teachers who focus on teaching to the test, have been

known to overemphasize test preparation strategies for specific item formats, the specific content covered on previously administered test forms preparing students to pass tests rather than learn essential knowledge, skills, and abilities.

2. Evaluate, as recommended by the Standards on Professional Development, the impact of McREL's professional development on participant **achievement**. Self report data of participants' satisfaction and perceived benefits are valuable, but not sufficient to inform design of quality professional development activities. Once data documents that workshop participants (e.g., teachers) have learned, conduct structured observations done by trained raters to determine how and to what degree these educators are using their newly acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities in their classrooms. From that point evaluate how these changes might be linked to improved student learning on the standards.
3. Consider the use of Generalizability studies (G studies) to estimate the effect that levels of facets such as the content standards, performance standards, teachers, students, etc. has on the amount of time required to teach a given lesson.

3. Recommendations for improvement

1. McREL might explore the degree to which standards in the Affective Domain interact with standards in the Cognitive Domain to produce substantial improvements in student achievement. This might be part of the continued meta-analysis work on what works in the classroom.
2. McREL might consider using complementary data gathering strategies for validating standards-based reform. Methods might include: (1) surveys of teacher and student perceptions of how and how much instruction has changed as a result of standards based reform, exploring intended (e.g., emphasis on higher order thinking skills) and unintended consequences (e.g., over emphasis on test taking skills); (2) structured observations by trained raters who look for evidence that intended outcomes are being taught (i.e., an important component of instructional validity); and (3) unobtrusive measures to explore whether teaching behaviors related to standards-based instruction are modified when the teacher perceives that he/she is not being observed.

B. To what extent does McREL assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

1. Strengths

McREL's four comprehensive and collaborative applied research and development programs, implemented in full partnership with stakeholders in each of the seven states in the central region, created tools and strategies that facilitated systemic reform for all students. The

projects have assisted local school systems and state departments to (1) identify and implement standards, curriculum and instructional strategies and assessments in diverse formats congruent with those standards based on needs and current best practice; (2) identify human development and motivation factors that advance instruction, learning and systemic change; (3) develop strategies and tools that enhance organizational capacity to learn; and (4) enhance their knowledge of how educational systems interact to affect systemic reform efforts. Regional Field Service Teams developed services based on the specific needs of each state and the cross cutting needs of the region. The field activities included design and production of publications, technology networks, holding conferences and special meetings providing technical assistance and information and resource dissemination via multiple modes. As one of the ten RELs, McREL planned interventions that rely on the collective expertise of all of the regional laboratories.

2. Areas of needed Improvement

1. McREL in the hopes of reaching the maximum number of customers may be going a mile wide and an inch deep to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies. But given that McREL is seeking to meet the needs of a vast number of customers in seven states, perhaps some depth is the trade off for breath of impact.

3. Recommendations for improvement

1. Continue to explore options for scaling up that might be more effective than the trainer-of-trainer model.

C. To what extent has McREL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

1. Strengths

1. McREL is a national leader in curriculum, learning and instruction. By adapting and implementing content standards, McREL has developed a model for tracking standards and benchmarks in the content areas identified in the National Goals, which

include science, mathematics, history, geography, the arts, language arts, and health. McREL has also been monitoring the development of standards related to higher order thinking skills, a. k. a. “skills for success” and has analyzed the knowledge and skills considered essential in the world of work. School districts and state departments of education have used the extensive McREL standards data base, which is available on line (www.mcrel.org), for developing and refining their own standards. The laboratory has also developed and disseminated print resource materials, has monitored and integrated research literature, provided extensive professional development opportunities, sponsored numerous conferences and workshops, presented at regional and national forums and developed extensive partnerships with USDE funded institutions and service providers.

2. Professional organizations such as the ASCD, Phi Delta Kappa, The International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English and the APA are distributing McREL workshops on standards, alternative assessment models, learner and learning centered instructional models, and new curriculum frameworks. Additionally McREL staff have served or are serving on the editorial boards of education journals.

2. Areas of needed Improvement

1. Explore the relationship between content standards (the domain of knowledge, skills, and abilities that students should know and be able to do) and performance standards (what level of accomplishment is good enough?).
2. Explore strategies of reporting data on multiple and diverse measures across standards, a “measurement mosaic” to lessen the chance that only those content standards that can be reliably and validly measured on high-stakes large-scale assessments receive disproportionate resources.

3. Recommendations for improvement

1. When the goal is to determine stakeholder attitudes about standards (e.g., *What Americans Believe Students Should Know: A Survey of U.S. Adults*), it is essential to consider whether the methodology employed given the funds available will yield the data truly desired. If not, the funds might better be redirected. Before two more studies are conducted to survey the business community and educators regarding what students should know using the methodology employed in the previous study, researchers might thoughtfully consider how some of the limitations of that survey design might have biased the results. Some variables related to content standards that could be expected to impact the results obtained include, but are not limited to: the ordering of the standards within and across content areas (i.e., position effect), the number of standard statements per subject presented, the level of standard specificity, the phrasing of the standard and benchmark statements, and respondent perception of the definition of satisfactory performance either on each standard or the collection of standards within a discipline.

2. The assessment design and development work essential to standards-based research and reform, is often more controversial and loaded with decision options that have numerous benefits and trade-offs, than the identification of the content standards themselves. As the recognized leader on educational standards, McREL has the responsibility to enhance its expertise and influence in the area of assessments and performance standards development and research intended to document student impact.

VI. Overall Evaluation of Total Laboratory Programs, Products, and Services

McREL is a successful Regional Educational Laboratory. Their cutting-edge work on standards has the potential to have tremendous positive impact on students. Like every large organization, they have some concerns which they need to address to ensure total quality. The three major ones are related to research and development issues.

VII. Broad Summary of Strengths, and Issues to Consider

McREL strengths are numerous. First, and foremost, they have a multi-talented, energetic, caring, and motivated staff with an impressive shared goal: to be the Standard on Standards and the operating system (McREL inside) of the standards movement. By leveraging funds from other sources, they have accomplished an enormous amount of work. They are engaged in cutting edge projects, for the most part, which are on track and within expected timelines except for a few deliverables. When modifications to the proposed work has occurred justifications have been convincing. The work quality is the direct result of the talent combined with a diverse quality assurance program and a caring involved governing board. The two signature programs reviewed were impressive.

Issues to Consider: Areas and Strategies for Improvement

Based on the site presentations and interviews and a review of a small sample of sources provided by DIR from a domain of considerable size, the major areas of concern appear to be: (1) the enhancement of internal communication and coordination to reduce duplication of effort across programs; (2) the production and dissemination of peer reviewed work in refereed journals; (3) clarification for stakeholders and customers what McREL is and depth and breadth of products and services available; (4) balancing knowledge of McREL's work with its capacity; (5) balancing concerns within and across the seven states within the central region; (6) increasing cultural diversity both on the board on their staff; and (7) a more systematic and rigorous collection of evaluation data, attending to issues such as representativeness and size of samples, response rates, etc.